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Lessons From the Frontline

Increasing CIA's Value Added to the Senior Policymaker (U)

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The position of "Special Adviser to the Ambassador-at-Large for the New Independent States"--a position I occupied at the Department of State for two years--is a symbol of the strides the CIA has made over the past several years to get to know our customers better and to provide them better service. The decision to dispatch a senior officer from the Directorate of Intelligence (DI) on nonreimbursable detail to the front office of the bureau responsible for former Soviet Union affairs was made by John McLaughlin, then Director of the Office of Slavic and Eurasian Analysis, at the advent of a new administration in early 1993. Many other CIA positions have been established at State, but this was--and remains--the only one where a senior officer sits directly in the front office of a bureau and serves primarily in an intelligence liaison function.

Striving for Relevance

The purpose of establishing a position directly attached to the front office of the bureau (not yet officially a bureau but operating as one for all practical purposes) was to improve CIA's ability to understand the policy priorities and concerns of the bureau and thus to allow us to adjust and target our intelligence support to the needs of the Ambassador-at-Large and his staff. Serving as a facilitator between the bureau and CIA provided me a perch from which to see the strides the Agency has made in re-orienting itself toward an array of products tailored precisely to the needs--and often the specific requests--of policymakers. I was impressed with the responsiveness of DI analysts and other Agency officers to policymaker requests and to the quality of the product provided day after day. Sometimes it was a map, chart, graph, an informal note, or a phone call. And sometimes the best service was simply putting the right two people in touch.

Gratified as I was to see day in and day out the quality of the product and the can-do attitude of our people, I also learned just how much further we can go to improve our support to senior officials in the executive branch. Working in proximity to senior officials brought home just how difficult it is for us to stay relevant--providing products that the senior policymaker cannot do without. In addition, I was often frustrated by our failure to contribute more. Just as American business finds itself in an increasingly competitive environment, the Intelligence Community (IC) is in a similarly tough struggle for the attention of the policymaker. I sometimes felt like a soldier on the frontlines, trying my best to gain access for our information and analysis but not always feeling that I had succeeded.

Some say that the problem is that we now have to compete with CNN and other purveyors of 24-hour information and analysis on world affairs. I believe it is more illuminating to understand the problem as competition for time and access to officials who have a sobering array of demands on their schedule--not only from other sources of information and analysis, but also from foreign officials, the Washington ambassadorial corps, American interest groups, Congressional committees, journalists, and many others who are demanding a piece of the policymaker's time. In this environment, they have little time to read

or to be briefed on anything by anyone. They will sit still for a CIA memorandum or briefing only if it is clear that what they will get out of it is essential to their agenda.

Room for Improvement

I came away from my two years at the Department convinced that there is more that we have to do if we want to survive in this environment.

State is only one of CIA's key customers, and, in some respects, it is a unique organization. But my conversations with others who have served on policy details suggests that there are common patterns. Based on my experience, I believe that there are several areas that demand attention if CIA hopes to further strengthen its support to senior policymakers and make itself more relevant to the policy process.

Living with the Customer. Living at the Department, sitting in staff meetings, and joining in informal discussions gives one a critical leg up in understanding the issues being weighed and options being considered in the early stages of the policy process. It is impossible to duplicate this kind of access with occasional parish or phone calls. Yet, the DI still does not have this kind of access in most bureaus at State (and elsewhere). Expanding the number of such liaison positions could have a big impact on the relevance and timeliness of our . Of course, there are some serious barriers to such an expansion. There are those in State--and no doubt in other agencies--who would just as soon not see a larger CIA presence. And, in the current resource environment, adding more detailees would probably mean reducing the number of officers we have devoted to other important tasks. Nonetheless, the benefits of expanding our corps of CIA representatives on the frontlines would be well worth the investment.

The creation of the Office of Policy Support in the DI provides an opportunity to take a close look at the costs and benefits of expanding our cadre of policy support representatives and perhaps re-examining the current assignments of DI officers already deployed to see if they should be repositioned to give us more return on our investment. The Office should also take a close look at how these representatives can be provided better logistic and computer support. The logistic support I received was improving during my tenure at the Department, but it was still far from what it needed to be to guarantee that we were in a position to provide top-quality service on a daily basis.

Better Service for the "Second-Tier" Official. We have made great strides over the last year or two in upgrading the relevance and sophistication of our support to the president and other principals via the *President's Daily Brief* (PDB) and associated products. That progress only magnifies the gap that already existed between the quality of our support for the principals and the support we provide to the next level down--the undersecretaries, assistant secretaries, and senior directors at the NSC. I lived with this difference at State. Because I also facilitated PDB support for the Deputy Secretary of State from my position as Special Adviser to the Ambassador-at-Large, I observed on a daily basis the kind of quality support for the deputy secretary that did not make it beyond his office at State. Similarly, I confronted, on a daily basis--in my morning intelligence briefings for the Ambassador-at-Large and his deputies--the difference in quality between the PDB and the *National Intelligence Daily*, now the *Senior Executive Intelligence Brief* (SEIB). There are potentially great gains to be had from efforts to target products specifically to key second-tier officials, to upgrade the quality of the daily intelligence support they are provided, and, to the extent consistent with security concerns, to make some of the products provided to PDB principals available also to their key advisers at the next level down.

The point of launching the SEIB was to start a process of significantly upgrading support for this tier of senior officials. There are a lot of tough decisions that lie ahead if the new publication is to fulfill that potential.

One-Stop Shopping for "the Facts." Spending two years with some of our most demanding customers forced me to think hard about what constitutes CIA's "value added" for the busy policymaker. There is no question that one of the most important things policymakers need from us is not analysis, but "facts"--data, maps, graphics, and information. One of the most appreciated products we provided to the Department during my tenure was a Venn diagram exhibiting the complex interconnections among the

array of European international institutions. This diagram was used in many high-level meetings and passed to a number of foreign officials.

Despite the proliferation of other sources of "facts" about international affairs, the IC is at no risk of losing this business area. There are a couple of reasons for this. No one else can come close in responsiveness or comprehensiveness. Moreover, the proliferation of sources actually adds to the policymaker's difficulty in tracking them all and figuring out which ones are important. In this sense, there is a real need we can fill--monitoring and filtering this intimidating flow of information--and thus offering one-stop shopping for the policymaker when he needs an unbiased account of what is out there. I have heard it said that this area is not CIA's business, that we should concentrate on intelligence and let others provide the data that are available from other, more open sources. I would argue that we should recognize this as a business area where CIA and the other members of the IC have real competitive advantage. Senior policymakers need our help, and no one else outside the IC can come close to providing the quality of support that we can provide.

Essential Analysis. I have heard CIA analysts complain that senior policymakers want our information but do not really want our analysis. This is not the case. For a variety of reasons, they need and want our analysis--background and context, assessment of the evidence, and implications--as much as the facts themselves. One of the requests I fielded most often was from senior officials who already had some piece of information or reporting and wanted our help in assessing its validity, importance, and context.

While our analysis is wanted, I was often reminded, during my time in the Department, that it is not always highly regarded. In some cases, complaints about the quality of our analysis may disguise unhappiness that our conclusions conflict with the policymaker's agenda. But other barriers of our own making sometimes stand in the way of our analysis being taken seriously. It comes down to what might be summed up as expertise. In offering analysis, we are competing with academics, think tanks, journalists, and the policymakers themselves who have extensive background, language training, and time on the ground in their area of responsibility. In this situation, it is difficult for intelligence analysts who cannot demonstrate the same background, expertise, and time on the ground to be taken seriously. I left the Department reinforced in the belief that the renewed emphasis that the DI is putting on building expertise and augmenting language skills is vital to our future.

Stronger Community Partnerships. Advancing these objectives will not be possible without stronger partnerships with some of our IC colleagues, especially in light of the limits that prevent our throwing more resources at the problem. There is certainly a substantial amount of cooperation already: as far as CIA and State go, for instance, my INR colleagues and I worked hard at making our relationship a cooperative one on a daily basis. But there are many missed opportunities for greater cooperation. INR and CIA are at the moment far from thinking and acting as partners in providing top-quality intelligence to senior customers at State. This situation is the result of the current structure of relationships. Stronger partnership with INR is one way for CIA to make progress toward better serving senior customers at State, and certainly a necessary route to gaining acceptance for a larger number of Agency officers serving in capacities similar to mine. INR officers could in some places substitute for DI officers as CIA's forward observers in State bureaus, facilitating CIA as well as INR support and providing the Agency the kind of daily feedback that we need to stay relevant.

Early Bird Service. Serving on the frontlines at State also gives one some perspective on the ongoing discussion about the need for a "24-hour" DI. The biggest window for direct intelligence support in the office of the Ambassador-at-Large is first thing in the morning, when the Ambassador and his deputies look for an update on developments in "their" part of the world. The SEIB and the INR *Summary* are part of that support, but each day a large share of the need is for an update on events that develop in the region after the SEIB and the INR summary have gone to press. Because of the current publication cycle, the working day in most countries in the area of responsibility of the bureau for the former Soviet states starts in the middle of the night and is just about to wrap up by the time our policymakers come into the office. Early each morning, I found myself scrambling with phone calls and e-mail to put together a morning update on the latest developments for my principals. Sometimes, the quality of this support depended on my ability, flying solo, to monitor Russian television news programs on the State grid and to add my own interpretation. Gratifying perhaps, but not ideal and sustainable in the long run.

This sometimes frenetic early-morning routine convinced me of the potential value of extended hours of operation that would allow CIA to fulfill this customer need for such support in a higher quality fashion than I could operating on an ad hoc basis. This does not necessarily mean a round-the-clock operation. Even a shift to earlier morning hours for at least part of the analytic corps could add significant value to what I and other CIA representatives can now offer.

An Even Greater Effort

Our goal should be to provide support to senior policymakers so timely, relevant, and essential to their agenda that they will seek us out to acquire it. The reality is that we too often have to work hard just to get them to pay attention. Making our products and services irresistible will require devoting even more effort, energy, and resources to the problem of direct customer support.

The DCI's Strategic Direction lays out essential steps to improving the quality of our analysis and operations. But his initiative will have been in vain if we do not give equal priority to identifying and implementing actions that will ensure the analysis we produce adds essential value for those customers the CIA was established to serve. They will sit still for a CIA memorandum or briefing only if it is clear that what they will get out of it is essential to their agenda.

Senior policymakers need our help, and no one else outside the IC can come close to providing the quality of support that we can provide.

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